

*Orizonia*  
**Ascension**



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M. A. GAUTHIER



*For Daniela, as long as it is with you, one lifetime is all I could  
ever wish for and a million are not enough.*



# Chapter

## ONE



### THE LAND IN THE SKY

The boy was trapped. Under a clear blue sky that was still void of anything unnatural or unsettling, his small body was illuminated by dancing flames that offered neither comfort nor warmth. If they did not free him at once, they would have to let the roaring inferno take him.

“Get the fucking door open, Callan!” someone shouted from the other side of the car.

“How ‘bout you shut the fuck up?”

Callan knew that nobody could hear him. Not with him muttering and the metal around him screeching under the heat like a trapped bird. Wiping away the sweat from his eyes, he’d said it anyway.

First, he had to get that door away from the car to get to the trapped passenger. Through the broken back seat window, he

could make out enough to get a grasp of the situation. Inside the burning mess that minutes earlier had been a pricy black limousine with a Welsh number plate still sat the youngest member of the unfortunate family that owned it. The car's front seat area was too compressed, offering no hope for the man and woman sitting there. The crash, in which both of his parents had died immediately, had stretched and bent the car and trapped the boy's legs between the driver's seat and his own.

Cursing, Callan slammed the heavy bolt cutter into the metal hinge and snapped it closed. To his relief, the material gave way almost instantly, and within seconds, he cut through both hinges. Covering his right hand with his police hat, Callan grasped the door handle and pulled the limousine door off with less effort than expected. Owing to his father's genes, who had been the three-times heavyweight boxing champion of Jamaica, as well as countless hours spent in the gym rather than the runs the police academy strongly encouraged, Callan's physique lent itself perfectly to this kind of work.

Coughing, he stretched one arm into the burning car until he could feel the soft resistance of the child's body. It seemed like the boy and his parents had been heading to a game of golf. The metal handles of several golf clubs had pierced the back seat next to the boy's lulling head. The heat inside was so intense that Callan felt his arm hair shrivel away into curly nothings within seconds. Even worse, however, was the smell. The scent of the burning corpses and its sickening similarity to roasted pork made Callan's stomach turn. He had smelled a plethora of bad things during the five years since he left the police academy, but a burning body was an entirely new experience.

"Hey, boy, can you hear me?" Callan shouted, coughing.

As far as he could see, the child didn't react to his shout. Careful not to touch anything burning, Callan moved his bulky frame into the vehicle and sat down next to the unconscious child. Im-

mediately, he saw that the child's injuries were worse than expected. A part of the centre console had pierced the boy's left side. His head was lying motionless on his chest. Because of the heavy black smoke, Callan could not make out if the child was still breathing or not. But there was no time to investigate. With all his strength, Callan pressed his feet against the dislocated driver's seat that pinned the boy down.

"Move, you goddamn piece of shit! Move!"

It seemed, however, that the heavy seat coated in burning leather was as unimpressed by Callan's physical efforts as by his swearing.

"Come on! I beg you, please," Callan shouted.

Then he heard the shouts from outside.

"Callan, come the fuck out, this thing is going to blow in seconds! The battery has caught on fire!"

Callan knew what an exploding battery of one of these fancy half-electric cars could mean for him. He and everyone within a five-metre radius, in fact.

During academy training, they learned how to handle situations like this. Leave the vicinity. Save your own life.

As a first-year cadet, Callan had thought this to be cowardly, almost traitorous. However, by the end of his time at the academy, it had made sense. It was better to save the life of a saviour who could rescue other people in the future than to die in a futile attempt to save one person.

*To hell with this.*

Stubbornly, Callan pummelled the back of the driver's seat repeatedly with the soles of his heavy boots while the flames licked his trouser leg painfully. With every strike, Callan's stomach clenched tighter together. He could feel fear slowly, agonisingly, replacing his sense of duty with every passing moment.

After what felt like an eternity, the resistance lessened. With another forceful strike, the backrest broke, and the child's legs dropped to the right.

Without thinking, Callan grabbed the boy's small body, tucked it under his right arm, and jumped out of the vehicle merely twenty-two seconds after he had entered it. Later, he would swear it had been hours.

Moments after, when Callan knelt in the cool grass some distance away, cradling the rescued child in his arms, the car exploded. The shockwave was almost enough to blow Callan off his knees. Small bits of the car and the heavy smell of burning electric wire hit him almost simultaneously. Without thinking, he bent his broad shoulders over the child, protecting him from the debris, squinting his eyes shut against the biting smoke. It was then that he noticed the small trickle of blood running out of the boy's mouth and that his eyes were open, his lips moving in a desperate attempt at speech.

"Don't," Callan whispered, taking the boy's head into his hands. When he had carried the boy out of the car, he had noticed that his spine felt much too soft right under the boy's neck. The gesture was intended as much as a comfort for the child as it was a way to stabilise his head and render any movement of the boy's neck impossible. He wanted to make sure the boy didn't worsen his own situation by turning his neck.

"It's okay."

The boy's voice was surprisingly clear.

"Stop speaking! We'll bring you to a hospital, and you'll be fine," Callan whispered, tears in his eyes. If from the smoke or the emotions was unclear even to himself.

The boy wasn't looking at him but past his head. "They are here. I can go with them."

"Damn right, you'll go with them, with my mates over there."

From the corner of his eye, Callan could see people approaching. For a moment, he glanced away from the injured child on the grass. He spotted four paramedics swiftly approaching, two of them pushing a stretcher that resembled the inside of an ambulance. They came to a clattering halt next to Callan.

“Is he hurt badly?” the first paramedic asked as soon as he reached them.

“Don’t know. He’s bleeding, and I felt something strange on his back. He seems to be conscious, though.”

The paramedic nodded, running his hands through his strawberry-blond hair.

“Phillip, administer the neck brace, you two,” he said, pointing at his colleagues with the stretcher, “see that you move him as little as possible. We have a possible spinal cord injury.”

Callan helped Phillip carefully instal the neck brace. He let go of the child only when he was sure that the contraption was properly secured.

“Andrew, can you understand me?”

Callan looked up at the first paramedic. So, this must be the boy’s name, then.

“Not responsive,” said the paramedic. He wasn’t addressing Callan or Andrew anymore but speaking to his colleagues.

Callan raised his head, his eyes wide.

“He was talking to me only seconds ago.”

The paramedic shrugged his shoulders and started checking the boy’s neck for a pulse while holding a small mirror under his nose.

“We have a pulse, but his breathing is shallow. Get him up.”

With precision, the two medics lowered the stretcher and delicately transferred the child onto it. Callan was glad to see that they were evidently highly experienced. The boy’s body hardly moved at all.

In the five years Callan Macinroy had served as a constable in the City of London police, he had seen the outcomes of more than a few accidents. Most of them involved some form of injury, and some, sadly, ended in fatalities. He got used to seeing, hearing, and smelling horrible things. But the cases where children were involved... they were just different.

“Callan, they’re asking if you want to ride with them in the ambulance.”

Callan looked up. He realised he must have been sitting on the grass, staring straight at the trees in the distance for several seconds. The man who frowned down at him was lanky, tall, brown-haired, and dressed in a constable’s uniform.

“Yeah, I’ll go,” Callan said, standing up while refusing his partner’s outstretched hand.

Looking around, he saw that the paramedics had almost finished loading up the boy. To his left, firefighters were battling the nervously twitching flames and the cloud of bright white sparks that had engulfed the car.

“What kind of car burns like this?” Callan asked, confused.

“It’s one of those new ones. You know, electric, with the batteries. I heard they’re still working out a few chinks to make them more secure during accidents. Fat load of good it will do to the parents.”

Callan nodded, wiping the grime, sweat, and tears from his face with a trembling hand.

“Are you okay?” Doyle, his partner, asked. “Did you get hurt in there?” He pointed with his right thumb over his back at the car.

“Don’t think so,” Callan said.

He looked down at his muscular arms. Two angry red marks had formed on his right forearm where he had touched the blazing-hot metal of the vehicle. He was relieved to see blisters forming. So, they were only second-degree burns. They would heal well enough.

“Nah, I am fine. I’ll see you tomorrow at the station. I’ll head home after this.”

“Send me a text if you need something.”

“Sure,” Callan said.

Without another look back at the burning car, Callan ran to the ambulance, intentionally ignoring the worried tone in his friend’s voice. When he arrived, the paramedic who had examined Andrew was closing the vehicle’s back doors.

“You want to ride with him in the back? Two of our guys are there monitoring him. We’ll need to move now; he doesn’t look good.”

Callan only nodded. Although it wasn’t mandatory or even standard police procedure, he wanted to ensure the boy was looked after. He took his burnt and beaten police officer’s hat out of his trouser pocket and put it on.

The inside of the ambulance smelled intimately familiar. Ever since his first time in one of these vehicles at the age of nine, he had disliked the scent. Nose wrinkled, he sat by the door as it was shut by the man outside. Two dull thumps sounded through the ambulance, followed by the high-pitched awakening of the powerful engine that powered the vehicle. It was only in the relative calm of the ambulance that Callan noticed the burn marks all over the boy’s legs. The paramedics had cut off large portions of his pants to reveal wet, red, and black injuries caused by the high temperatures of the chemical fire inside the car. The boy regained consciousness about three minutes after they left the crash site. When he spoke, however, it was barely intelligible.

“What did he say?” Callan asked the man next to him.

“He’s delirious and thinks someone is going to take him away. We’re going to sedate him now.”

Callan looked the boy in the eyes. However, he did not return Callan’s gaze; instead, he continued to stare intently behind him

until his small eyes closed again because of the potent chemical mixture flowing through his bloodstream.

More than an hour later, when Callan left the extensive hospital building in Whitechapel, the sky was already turning a light shade of pink. Kicking an empty soda can, he made his way down the cramped driveway, past parked cars and a blue fence, toward the bustling street. It had been one of those days that had started out great but then turned into a shitshow. Sadly, there seemed to be more and more of those now.

Callan stroked a hand over his short, dark hair. With a height of almost two metres and a complexion that beautifully combined his Jamaican and cockney roots, he always leaned towards a more bulky physique. This was advantageous in his line of work but proved to be a hindrance while shopping for clothes.

With satisfaction, Callan noticed that the driver he had ordered with his smartphone had already arrived and parked at the sidewalk. A quick glance at the device confirmed that the shining black Mercedes was indeed waiting for him.

“Evening, sir,” the young driver greeted Callan as he opened the door.

“Good evening,” Callan answered, rubbing his burning eyes. Now that the adrenaline was leaving his system, tiredness was making its way up his chest.

His driver, probably in his mid-twenties, was of Arabic descent and had the perfectly coifed look of someone who drove these kinds of cars professionally. Sometimes, you got lucky with these services, and a real limousine driver who had some spare time picked you up. Callan caught himself thinking what it could have meant if the boy’s parents had been driven by a professional. Maybe the accident could have been avoided. But there was no real point in asking those kinds of questions. What was done was done.

One minute later, they drove down the busy streets of London, catching the brunt of the evening rush hour. Callan didn't mind, though. He leant back and closed his eyes for a moment, letting the events of the day pass through his mind once more.

“What the fuck!”

The driver's shouting voice was easily an octave higher than his speaking one. Callan opened his eyes almost immediately, every trace of drowsiness gone in an instant. He was just fast enough to see that the car in front of them had stopped abruptly and that they were going to collide with it. Owing doubtlessly to his experience, the driver managed to brake quickly and hard enough to prevent a major impact, though they still hit the other car. Callan was wrenched forward and then thrown back into his seat. No airbag hit his face. The crash must not have been bad enough.

“What happened?” he asked the driver, panting.

When he didn't get an answer, Callan turned his head towards the young man. He seemed unharmed, but instead of answering Callan's question, he opened the door and left the car, all without taking his eyes off the sky.

Following the young man's gaze, Callan squinted in expectation of looking into the evening sun. He need not have bothered, however, because there was no sun. In front of them, in the pinkish-blue sky, was a forest of enormous proportions, with rivers cutting through the dense mass of green and red trees like lightning. And Callan noted as he stared in awe that there were structures that were so geometrical and orderly that they could only be settlements of some kind. Some were larger, some smaller, but an enormous city surrounded by a crown of mountains dwarfed them all. The gigantic structure that filled almost the entire sky was tinted in the blueish pink of early evening. It hovered silently and moved across the sky at an almost imperceptibly slow pace.

Staring up at the new view, Callan stepped out of the car. All around him, he could hear the sounds of car crashes. Then there

was silence. People had left their cars and were staring up at the sky. A sky that was now filled with what could only be described as an entire continent, its surface facing downward, floating soundlessly hundreds of kilometres over Great Britain.